Local Autonomy in the Global Context

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The global economy infuses every aspect of our day to day lives, from the clothes we wear, to the food we eat, to our political choices. Dicken et al described the ability of global production systems to "mutate, shudder and shatter", demonstrating how the unpredictable ruptures associated with the global economy elude our ability to grasp their impact and to govern their activities. So how can citizens imagine governing themselves when as Giles Paquet notes 'nobody appears to be in charge any longer'? How does our understanding of the state apparatuses– the legislation, regulations, policies –speak to people's day to day experience in their communities? My recent fieldwork focusing on three small, rural communities in British Columbia, Canada, with a history of dependence on resource extraction (forestry and mining) poses two broad questions: how are communities responding to the externally generated ruptures associated with global capital and how do they govern themselves in response?

I want to take care not to imply that "globalization" or the "market economy" is solely responsible for the problems the case study communities faced. Global capital and intensified production processes may be factors that stimulate rupture events in communities, but globalization, considered broadly, has also provided many benefits to millions of people. Still other external factors impact communities, including, most recently, the global transmission of the corona virus, climate change (often through intervening factors: for example, the mountain pine beetle deforestation in central and northern BC), treaty negotiations with Indigenous peoples or with internationally recognized nation-states, and uneven demographic patterns. While the rupture events experienced by the case study communities were connected to recessionary periods whose timing was cyclical if not predictable, rupture events may also be experienced as episodic or random. Despite the nature of the rupture, its source, or its temporal context, the experiences of the three case study communities provide a deeper understanding of the way communities govern and are governed through potentially disruptive or divisive events.

Problematizing the 'Economy'

Responding coherently to rupture events was inhibited by community members' lack of awareness of the complex interrelationships of the constituent elements of the economy, and secondarily, a tendency to see the state as the primary site of governance. This resulted in understanding the economy as a singular phenomenon and was compounded by a tendency to see the state as the primary site of governance. The consequence of this framing is a constrained sense of how one might govern through complexity as well as a resulting diminution in community members' sense of agency and autonomy which ultimately impacts the choice of strategies communities employ to address rupture. In two of the case study communities, this resulted in a tendency to believe that solutions were vested almost exclusively in various authorities. Despite these limitations all three communities were implementing innovative self-governance solutions.

To test this, I deconstructed the concept of economy using a taxonomy in which the economy was understood to involve four major elements rather than one – capital, political, social, and household. The capital economy encompassed production, distribution, trade, and consumption of goods and services. The political economy included state programs and services, investments, physical infrastructure, and regulatory activities. The social economy included civil society entities and activities, and the household economy reflected activities of social reproduction which occur in the domestic, mainly familial sphere. Through this heuristic device, I developed a more nuanced understanding of the case study communities' interpretation of the concept of the economy. The result was

highly context and locale-specific responses in how community members understood the economy and the range of autonomous governance strategies they deployed to address the impacts of economic rupture. Three types of responses emerged: individual autonomous action (targeted activism); networked autonomous action (non-hierarchical, unstructured collaborative action); and, structured autonomous action (formal non-state structures that bridged state and community interests).

It became clear that to imagine a different economy, we have to come to grips with what we currently understand to *be* the economy. This is a necessary step to begin the process of democratizing capital. Similarly, to imagine a different concept of state, we have to create a space in which we understand self-governance to be as important as institutional governance. Existing theories such as Althusser's 'ideology') and Foucault's 'governmentality' are useful to understand how individuals are enrolled in processes that may not ultimately serve their individual or communal needs, but taken alone or together, they cannot adequately explain the tendency to singularize the capital economy and to privilege the state as the site for community solutions.

In response, I offer a complementary social explanation for individual's inability to discern between the simultaneously occurring interiorized relations of what is understood broadly as 'the economy'. I use this theory, which I call the social theory of simultaneity, to explain the tendency to default to the dominant narrative of the economy as a singular, immanent force rather than as an unpredictable assemblage of interdependent systems. This theory builds on Althusser's work on ideology, which suggests that individuals are subjectified by a dominant ideology in which they fully participate, resulting in a shared conception of reality. Through my theory, I suggest that in addition to being subjectified by an ideology that reinforces a singular conception of reality, when community members experience multiple intersecting systems simultaneously and are unable to discern the intersecting component elements, they deprive themselves of the tools necessary to move out of ideology. This causes them to condense all signals from a diversity of sources and the changes they represent into signals presumed to emanate from just one source. In doing so, there is a risk that smaller changes in the various systems become invisible, creating a false sense of stability and singular causability. Over time, the accretion of small changes within and between each element of the economy (the market, political, social and household spheres) in general may emerge as destabilizing rupture events (e.g., recessions) or as revolutionary ones (e.g., regime change). Community members' ability to sift the dynamics within and between systems is inhibited by an inability to discern the constituent elements at play because of false simplification of complexity —in effect, the inability to judge. This particular understanding may limit the options they believe are available.

Practices for Penetrating Simultaneity

The practical lessons that emerge from this research point to the importance of developing theoretical and empirical capacity in five areas: building community capacity to develop platforms of deeply situated knowledge; creating relationships that engage individuals and organizations across interests and social strata; employing strategies not dependent on existing normative governance structures; adopting approaches based on incremental persistence rather than expecting actions to result in conclusive or revolutionary change; and learning from neighbouring Indigenous self-governance aspirations. Actions taken locally, rather than having only localized impact, have the potential to create a sense of efficacy among community members that can have influence and impact beyond the local.

For small communities navigating complexity, the task may feel daunting and it is easy to feel hopelessness and futility. And yet community actors play a critical role in either sustaining the status quo in the complex economic web, or through their actions, beginning to address the behaviours, processes and systems that are ultimately not in their collective self-interest. Rather than seeing the complexity of the economy as a problem, one might instead imagine it as a virtue, in that it provides multiple points of entry for adjusting, reconfiguring and even upending the systems that exist. This knowledge allows people to make choices about how they engage with the different systems and to create a suite of actions that range from the individual to the institutional and from the local to the global. Being strategic about how as citizens we target our efforts increases our chances of effectiveness. Effectiveness increases our sense of efficacy and encourages us to do more. Skeptics may say, "Yes, but can a tradition of citizens working collaboratively for a common good be sustained rather than fleeting?" I suggest that what we understand 'sustained'

to mean is often viewed through the lens of our attachment to structure and authority as an expression of permanence, and ultimately, the uncontested quality of good governance. In the complex constellations of the global/local, the constituent parts are continuously shifting; nothing is sustained forever. While the *tradition* of citizens working together for the common good can be sustained, the ways in which that occurs will be forever evolving. If it were otherwise, we would simply be recreating structures and processes that might ultimately constrain us, in which we would elide into the comfortable space of governmentality.

About the author:

Dyan Dunsmoor-Farley has a PhD from the University of Victoria with undergraduate degrees in music (University of British Columbia) and interdisciplinary studies including sociology, political science, history, and human geography (Athabasca University and University of Victoria). Her interdisciplinary work examines small community self-governance strategies in response to the ruptures triggered by global capital. Prior to starting her doctoral studies Dyan held senior positions in the British Columbia government and had a successful consulting practice for which she received the Healthy Corporate Citizen Award by the Public Health Association of British Columbia (2018).